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Kehberg

reviews health proposal

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On Thursday, Rep. Denny Rehberg became the first Montana congressional delegation member to consider language creating a "Healthy Libby Fund" for Libby-area asbestos victims using a portion of Kootenai National Forest timber sale receipts.

Rehberg was in Libby to meet with a committee trying to find timber to keep the local plywood mill open and to find funding for asbestos victims healthcare.

"The people of Libby have suffered greatly from the contamination of the vermiculite mine," Rehberg said in a press release distributed prior to his visit. "As Montana's congressman, I intend to do all I can to help keep Libby on the road to recovery. A key part of that recovery is keeping the local economy viable."

The language for the "Healthy Libby Fund" was accepted by the community task force Monday working to solve two problems: Identify an additional 20 million board feet of timber for the Stimson Mill in Libby and find a funding mechanism for a local medical fund for asbestos victims.

The proposal accepted by the committee might raise up to \$1 million or not greater than 30 percent of the federal share a year from timber receipts collected on sales above the KNF's present baseline of 60 mmbf a year.

The language proposes that the money go to the "Lincoln County, Montana Health Department" to establish and operate a fund to provide health services to individuals with health-related problems from asbestos exposure prior to 2002 in or near Libby and who have been denied health care coverage by other existing health care programs.

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Andrew Miller, chief operating officer for Stimson, identified the need for at least an additional 20 mmbf of timber a year from the KNF if the Libby mill is to remain open in the near future.

Thus far the community committee has identified 5-15 mmbf in urban interface thinning, brushing and logging in the Libby and Fortine areas.

The urgency to find additional timber is based on the completion of a 10-year supply agreement with Plum Creek, which terminates in about 16 months.

Another problem plaguing Stimson is compensation liability claims from employees with asbestos-related health problems. Miller said the claims have helped pushed Stimson's insurance to astronomical levels with another increase pending next year.

He charged the committee with finding timber and a way to provide local residents with relief from asbestos-related health bills in the wake of W.R. Grace filing for bankruptcy.

For nearly 30 years, Grace mined and milled vermiculite that was contaminated with asbestos. While Grace has been providing health coverage for about 850 people with asbestos-related diseases, they have been tightening the qualifications and benefits for their plans.

Local, state and federal medical officials do not believe the Grace plan will remain in existence long enough to protect Libby area businesses from future liability claims or save the area's medical facilities from thousands of patients unable to pay for critically needed health care.

While U.S. Sen. Max Baucus has been investigating a white lung program, it's not believed locally that the benefits of a national program would fully cover local health needs. Thus supplemental coverage is believed necessary.

The idea of using timber receipts for the fund was first identified by Miller in discussions with administration and congressional representatives in late June. He shared that information with community members during a July teleconference meeting at Libby City Hall.

The idea is raising concerns among some members of the community task force. Rick Bass of the Yaak Valley Forest Council is concerned with putting the needs of sick and

dying people in with the contentious issue of forest management. Saying there is a need to cut trees for a medical fund would create a red flag with environmentalists and some members of congress, Bass said.

He's concerned about the success of the effort to keep the mill open. "My concern is this could be a polarizing item," he said.

However, Bass' concerns were dismissed during a brief discussion Monday.

Lincoln County Commissioner Rita Windom said the governor's task for Libby's asbestos-related health problems discussed hiring a statistician and an epidemiologist to create an actuarial study of the Libby problem.

First National Bank President John Johanson said no one has a handle on how big the health problem is outside of 850 people presently diagnosed and Grace spending so much money during the first two years of health insurance coverage.

"We don't know where we are in the progression of this disease," he said.

The medical fund committee can't estimate costs of long-term health unless they know how many people can be expected to be diagnosed in the coming years.

In addition to language calling for timber receipts to create a fund, the community task force is recommending that \$250,000 from timber receipts be provided for work associated with the completion of necessary documentation to proceed with additional timber sales from the Kootenai National Forest.

Task force facilitator Bruce Vincent said the congressional delegation told community members that creative proposals would be needed to be presented to them for consideration to solve both the timber supply and the health fund problems.